

TILLOU FINE ART

Irish Echo

Looking at Spinks' recent paintings, which are now on show at The Irish Arts Center on West 51st Street in Manhattan, is rather like looking at a map that keeps changing even as you consult it. He uses collages on canvas that are animated with evocative color (a lapis lazuli blue, to signify space or eternity, for example) interspersed with bold shapes (rectangles and circles). The undeniably static, or architectural composition, of his latest works is offset by their simultaneous and paradoxically disorientating emphasis on flux. The effect is quietly exhilarating. They seem to open and open. At one level they're the artists considered response to the thronging sights and sounds of New York City, for example, but they also delve deeper, into strangely unsettling realms that defy easy classification.

Maps are a recurring motif in Spinks' work, but they are made deliberately unreliable, intentionally disorientating, forcing the viewer to assess and reassess their most basic assumptions.

Superficially, at least, you can see where he gets some of it: his studio is in the shadow of the Manhattan Bridge, taking in the a broad expanse of Manhattan's skyline, so he need only look out his window to find inspiration. But of course there's more to it than that. There's his history, for a start. A spry and arrestingly youthful looking individual, he grew up in the hardscrabble shipbuilding and coalmining working-class estates of Newcastle upon Tyne in the 1950s, among people who spoke and lived with a raw energy he has never forgotten.

Spending every one of his childhood summers in Ennis, Co. Clare, he grew familiar with daily life in Ireland too -- seeing far beyond its tourist board veneer to some of the more sordid goings on that also typified Irish life during that particular period.

"My great pal in those days was a lad named Michael," Spinks said. "Unfortunately, he was the type of lad that John McGahern often writes about: a dark horse, a misfit, a lad who lived with his mother -- he was a figure of fun in the local community, he wasn't popular with the local girls. He was a tragic figure, ultimately. That gothic side of Ireland is just terrifying to me."

Spinks' tendency to reflect upon the darker side of human nature is reflected in his work, too. He can meditate on distress and upset with the same clear-eyed, forensic intensity that typifies his more celebratory work. Irish traditional music has been an influence, along with jazz -- and indeed anything that provides latitude for spontaneity, intuition and improvisation.

Cast your eye about his studio and your curiosity will be rewarded by works that immediately compel your attention the moment you first encounter them: a small letter from his father, hanging unobtrusively in one corner of his studio, is laminated with pages culled from "Robinson Crusoe." Both epistles recount the details of individual lives, lives full of everyday incident and occasion, but their juxtaposition is strangely moving here, because both have -- we realize -- come to an end.

"I sent him many letters over the years and requested that he keep them all," Spinks said. "But maybe it was a working-class thing, some kind of fear of exposure, because he burned them anyway. So in a way, this is my revenge on him."

For all his manifest subtlety as an artist, Spinks is surprisingly frank about his process. He will happily demystify his approach to art for you without reducing it in any way. This is doubtless because he is still so genuinely intrigued by its myriad possibilities that he almost seems to be commencing his explorations for the first time.

"Art is like any faith," Spinks said. "I once had a vocation to become a monk, and now I'm an artist, and both are essentially conduits for the big questions. No one knows what's going on. But people look at art because they hope it will help them to make some sense of the world. My job is to present them with possibilities -- I think of them as benign snares -- if you can pull someone in from across the room, then you've really got them, and the journey begins."

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